# ABRAHAM LINCOLN IN 1854*

By HORACE WHITE

HEN I was asked to address you on some particular event or feature of Mr. Lincoln's career, I chose the period of 1854, because I then first became acquainted with him, and because he then received his first great awakening and showed his countrymen what manner of man he was. His debate with Douglas in 1858 became more celebrated, because it focussed the attention of a greater audience and led to larger immediate results, but the latter was merely a continuation of the former. The subject of debate was the same in both years, the combatants were the same, and the audiences were in part the same. The contest of 1858 has been more talked about and written about than any other intellectual encounter in our national annals, and that is perhaps another reason why I should address you on the earlier one which was its real beginning. . . .

### The Speech at Springfield on October 4th

Mr. Lincoln began his speech with an historical sketch of the events leading to the repeal of the Missouri Compromise, and then took up the fallacy of Douglas's "sacred right of self-government," to which he gave a merciless exposure, turning it over and over, inside and out, stripping off its mask, and presenting it in such light that nobody could fail to see the deception embodied in it. Such an exposition necessarily involved a discussion of slavery in all its aspects, and here for the first time do we find any broad and resounding statement of Mr. Lincoln's own attitude toward the institution. Here, perhaps, was the first distinct occasion for his making such a statement. He had voted in Congress some forty times for the Wilmot Proviso, so that his opposition to the extension of slavery into the Territories was not doubtful. As a stump speaker he had languidly supported the compromise measures of 1850. But until now there had been no occasion which imperatively called upon him to declare his position on the slavery question as a national political issue.

Such a call had now come, and he did not hesitate to tell the whole truth as he understood it. The telling of it makes this speech one of the imperishable political discourses of our history, if not of all time. It is superior to Webster's reply to Hayne, because its theme is loftier and its scope wider. The keynote of Webster's speech was patriotism—the doctrine of self-government crystallized in the Federal Union; that of Lincoln's was patriotism plus humanity, the humanity of the negro whose place in the family of man was denied, either openly or tacitly, by the supporters of the Nebraska bill. I think also that Lincoln's speech is the superior of the two as an example of English style. It lacks something of the smooth, compulsive flow which takes the intellect captive in the Websterian diction, but it excels in the simplicity, directness and lucidity which appeal both to the intellect and to the heart.

I heard the whole of that speech. It was a warmish day in early Oc-

* Passages from an address delivered before the Illinois State Historical Society, at its ninth annual meeting at Springfield, Illinois, January 30, 1908.

tober, and Mr. Lincoln was in his shirt sleeves when he stepped on the platform. I observed that, although awkward, he was not in the least embarrassed. He began in a slow and hesitating manner, but without any mistakes of language, dates or facts. It was evident that he had mastered his subject, that he knew what he was going to say and that he knew he was right. He had a thin, high-pitched falsetto voice of much carrying power, that could be heard a long distance in spite of the bustle and tumult of a crowd. He had the accent and pronunciation peculiar to his native State, Kentucky. Gradually he warmed up with his subject, his angularity disappeared and he passed into that attitude of unconscious majesty that is so conspicuous in Saint-Gaudens's statue at the entrance to Lincoln Park in Chicago. I have often wondered how this artist, who never saw the subject of his work, could have divined his presence and his dignity as a public speaker so perfectly.

### Lincoln's Impassioned Utterances

Progressing with his theme, his words began to come faster and his face to light up with the rays of genius and his body to move in unison with his thoughts. His gestures were made with his body and head rather than with his arms. They were the natural expression of the man, and so perfectly adapted to what he was saying that anything different from it would have been quite inconceivable. Sometimes his manner was very impassioned, and he seemed transfigured with his subject. Perspiration would stream from his face, and each particular hair would stand on end. Then the inspiration that possessed him took possession of his hearers also. His speaking went to the heart because it came from the heart. I have heard celebrated orators who could start thunders of applause without changing any man's opinion. Mr. Lincoln's eloquence was of the higher type, which produced conviction in others because of the conviction of the speaker himself. His listeners felt that he believed every word he said, and that, like Martin Luther, he would go to the stake rather than abate one jot or tittle of it. In such transfigured moments as these he was the type of the ancient Hebrew prophet as I learned that character at Sunday-school in my childhood.

That there were, now and then, electrical discharges of high tension in Lincoln's eloquence is a fact little remembered, so few persons remain who ever came within its range. The most remarkable outburst took place at the Bloomington Convention of May 29, 1856, at which the anti-Nebraska forces of Illinois were first collected and welded together as one party. Mr. John L. Scripps, editor of the Chicago *Democratic Press*, who was present—a man of gravity little likely to be carried off his feet by spoken words—said:

> Never was an audience more completely electrified by human eloquence. Again and again during its delivery they sprang to their feet and upon the benches and testified by long-continued shouts and the waving of hats how deeply the speaker had wrought upon their minds and hearts. It fused the mass of hitherto incongruous elements into perfect homogeneity; and from that day to the present they have worked together in harmonious and fraternal union.

The speech of 1854 made so profound an impression on me that I feel under its spell to this day. It is known in history as Mr. Lincoln's Peoria speech. Although first delivered in Springfield on October 4th, it was repeated twelve days later at Peoria. Mr. Lincoln did not use a scrap of paper on either occasion, but he wrote it out afterwards at the request of friends and published it in successive numbers of the weekly *Sangamon Journal* at Springfield. In like manner were the orations of Cicero preserved. In this way has been preserved for us the most masterly forensic utterance of the whole slavery controversy, as I think. . . .

Twelve days after the Springfield debate of 1854 the two champions met again at Peoria. Douglas was evidently troubled by the unexpected vigor of his opponent, for after the Peoria debate he approached Lincoln and flattered him by saying that he was giving him more trouble on the territorial and slavery question than the whole United States Senate, and therefore proposed that both should abandon the field and return to their homes. Lincoln consented. Douglas, however, broke the agreement by making a speech at Princeton on the evening of the 18th of October. He afterwards said that he did n't want to speak at Princeton, but that Lovejoy provoked him and forced him to do so in self-defence. Lincoln was not satisfied with that explanation, but he considered himself released from the agreement, and accordingly spoke at Urbana on the evening of the 24th.

### The Urbana Speech

Henry C. Whitney heard the Urbana speech. He gives an account of it in his book, "Life on the Circuit with Lincoln." Whitney was a resident of Urbana. He says that he called at the old Pennsylvania House on the east side of the public square on the evening of the 24th, and that he there found Mr. Lincoln and David Davis in a plainly furnished bedroom with a comfortable wood fire. It was his first meeting with either of them. He was received cordially by both. Lincoln was in his story-telling humor, and after some time spent in that way they went over to the Court House opposite, where eleven tallow candles, burning on the lower sashes of the windows, gave a sign of something unusual going on in the town. The house was full of people, and Lincoln then and there made his third speech on the mighty issue of slavery. Whitney was impressed, as I had been twenty days earlier, that he had been listening to "a mental and moral giant." The men went back to the hotel together, and Lincoln resumed his story-telling at the point where he had left off, "as if the making of such a speech as this was his pastime." . . .

### Lincoln Satisfied with the Result

Lincoln took his defeat [for the Senatorship] in good part. Later in the evening, at a reception at the house of Mr. Ninian Edwards, whose wife was a sister of Mrs. Lincoln, and who had been much interested in Lincoln's success, he was greatly surprised to hear, just before the guests began to arrive, that Trumbull had been elected. He and his family were easily reconciled to the result, however, since Mrs. Trumbull had been from her girlhood, as Miss Julia Jayne, a favorite in Springfield society. When she and Judge Trumbull arrived they were naturally the centre of attraction. Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln came in a little later. The hostess and her husband greeted them most cordially, saying that they had wished for his success, and that while he must be disappointed yet he should bear in mind that his principles had won. Mr. Lincoln smiled, moved toward the newly elected Senator and saying, "Not too disappointed to congratulate my friend Trumbull," shook him warmly by the hand. Mr. Lincoln's own testimony as to the facts and his own feelings regarding them are set forth at length, and quite minutely, in a letter to Elihu B. Washburne, dated February 9, 1855, the next day after the election. He says in conclusion: "I regret my defeat moderately, but am not nervous about it. I could have headed off every combination and been elected had it not been for Matteson's double game—and his defeat now gives me more pleasure than my own gives me pain. On the whole it is perhaps as well for our general cause that Trumbull is elected."

And so it seems to me now. Lincoln's defeat was my first great disappointment in politics, and I was slow in forgiving Judd, Palmer and Cook for their share in bringing it

about. But before the campaign of 1858 came on, I was able to see that they had acted wisely and well. They had not only satisfied their own constituents, and led many of them into the new Republican organization, but they had given a powerful reinforcement to the party of freedom in the nation at large, in the person of Lyman Trumbull, whose high abilities and noble career in the Senate paved the way for thousands of recruits from the ranks of the Democratic party.

### Personal Association with Lincoln

As I have already remarked, my personal acquaintance with Lincoln began in 1854. I had just passed my twentieth birthday. I was introduced to him shortly before he rose to make the speech [at Springfield on October 4th] which has been here feebly described. I had studied his countenance a few moments beforehand, when his features were in repose. It was a marked face, but so overspread with sadness that I thought that Shakespeare's melancholy Jacques had been translated from the forest of Arden to the capital of Illinois. Yet when I was presented to him and we began a few words of conversation this expression of sorrow dropped from him instantly. His face lighted up with a winning smile, and where I had a moment before seen only leaden sorrow I now beheld keen intelligence, genuine kindness of heart and the promise of true friendship.

After this introduction it was my fortune during the next four years to meet him several times each year, as his profession brought him frequently to Chicago, where I was employed in journalism. I became Secretary of the Republican State Committee and was thus thrown into closer intercourse with him, and thus I learned that he was an exceedingly shrewd politician. N. B. Judd, Dr. C. H. Ray and Ebenezer Peck were the leading party managers; but Lincoln was a frequent visitor at the campaign headquarters, and on important occasions he was specially sent for. The committee paid the utmost deference to his opinions. In fact, he was nearer to the people than they were. Travelling the circuit he was constantly brought in contact with the most capable and discerning men in the rural community. He had a more accurate knowledge of public opinion in central Illinois than any other man who visited the committee rooms, and he knew better than anybody else what kind of arguments would be influential with the voters and what kind of men could best present them.

I learned also by this association that he was extremely eager for political preferment. This seemed to me then, as it does now, perfectly proper. Nor did I ever hear any criticism visited upon him on account of his personal ambition. On the contrary, his merits placed him so far in advance that nothing was deemed too good for him. Nobody was jealous of him. Everybody in the party desired for him all the preferment that he could possibly desire for himself. In the great campaign of 1858 I travelled with him almost constantly for four months, the particulars of which journeying I have related in the second edition of Herndon's "Life of Lincoln." After his election as President I was sent by my employers to Washington City as correspondent of the Chicago *Press and Tribune*, and thus I had occasional meetings with him until very near the day of his death. In short, I was privileged to be within the range of his personal influence during the last eleven years of his life, when he was making history and when history was making him.

### The Humorist and the Moralist

Mr. Lincoln was a many-sided man and one who presented striking contrasts. He was the most humorous being I ever met, and also one

of the most serious. His humor was of the impromptu and contagious kind that takes possession of all parts of the person as well as all the parts of speech. As a master of drollery, he surpassed all of his contemporaries in Illinois, and yet his solemnity as a public speaker and a political and moral instructor was like that of an Old Testament prophet. He was the only public speaker I have ever known, thus doubly gifted, whose powers of mirth did not submerge or even impair his powers of gravity. "He combined within himself," says Mr. Henry C. Whitney, "the strangely diverse rôles of head of the State in the agony of civil war, and also that of the court jester; and was supremely eminent in both characters." This sounds like a paradox, but it is quite true. The Lincoln who fought Douglas on the stump in 1854 and 1858 took all of his jocose as well as his serious traits to Washington in 1861.

How are we to account for these wonderful turns "from grave to gay, from lively to severe"? Well, he was not the only person thus doubly endowed. The same genius that gave us Macbeth, and Lear, and Hamlet gave us Falstaff, and Touchstone, and Dogberry. Shakespeare was the superior of Sophocles in tragedy and of Plautus in comedy. Lincoln did not have the gift of poetry, but within the range of prose his power of expression was akin to that of Shakespeare. I chanced to open the other day his Cooper Institute speech. This is one of the few printed speeches that I did not hear him deliver in person. As I read the concluding pages of that speech the conflict of opinion that preceded the conflict of arms, then sweeping upon the country like an approaching solar eclipse, seemed prefigured like a chapter of the Book of Fate. Here again he was the Old Testament prophet, before whom Horace Greeley bowed his head, saying that he had never listened to a greater speech, although he had heard several of Webster's best.

### The Anti-Slavery Orator

The subject of human slavery, which formed the principal theme of Mr. Lincoln's speech, has touched many lips with eloquence and lighted many hearts with fire. I listened to most of the great anti-slavery orators of the last half-century, including Wendell Phillips, Owen Lovejoy, and Henry Ward Beecher, but I must say that Abraham Lincoln, who was not classed as an anti-slavery orator, or even an anti-slavery man, before he issued the Emancipation Proclamation, made a stronger anti-slavery impression upon me than any of them.

The reason why he was not reckoned by the anti-slavery men as one of themselves was that he made the preservation of the Union, not the destruction of slavery, his chief concern. But he held then, as he did later, that the Union must be preserved consistently with the Constitution and with the rule of the majority. Preserving it by infringing these was, in his view, an agreement to destroy it.

Mr. Lincoln quickly gained the confidence of strangers, and, if they were much with him, their affection as well. I found myself strongly drawn to him from the first, and this feeling remains to me now as a priceless possession. James Russell Lowell said that he counted it a great gain to have lived at the same time with Abraham Lincoln. How much greater the gain to have felt the subtle influence of his presence! This personal quality, whose influence I saw growing and widening among the people of Illinois from day to day, eventually penetrated to all the Northern States, and after his death to all the Southern States. It was this magical personality that commanded all loyal hearts. It was this leadership that upheld confidence in the dark hours of the war and sent back to the White House the sublime refrain:

"We are coming, Father Abraham, three hundred thousand more."

Could any other man then living have grappled the affections and confidence of the plain people and held them steadfast and unwavering as did this homely giant of the prairies? He was himself one of the plain people. What was in his mind and heart was in theirs. He spoke straight into their bosoms. He translated the weightiest political and social problems this country has ever dealt with into language that all could understand. Nobody was so humble, nobody so high, that he could not draw new lessons and fresh inspiration from Abraham Lincoln during that great crisis.

Looking back upon the whole anti-slavery conflict, is it not a cause for wonder that the man who finally led the nation through the Red Sea, and gave his own life at the very entrance of the promised land, was born in a slave State, of the most humble parents, in crushing poverty and in the depths of ignorance, and had reached the age of fifty before he was much known outside of his own State? Was there ever such unpromising material from which to fashion the destroyer of American slavery?

### Lincoln's Growing Fame

Abraham Lincoln has been in his grave more than forty-two years. When he was stricken down by an assassin's hand, it was said by many of his contemporaries, and perhaps believed by most of them, that he had passed away at the culminating point of his fame.

The world's history contains nothing more dramatic than the scene in Ford's Theatre. The Civil War, the emancipation of a race, the salvation of our beloved Union, combined to throw the strongest light upon "the deep damnation of his taking off." In spite of these blazing accessories, we should have expected, before the end of forty-two years, that a considerable amount of dust would have settled upon his tomb. This is a busy world. Each generation has its own problems to grapple with, its own joys and sorrows, its own cares and griefs, to absorb its thoughts and compel its tears. Time moves on, and while the history of the past increases in volume, each particular thing in it dwindles in size, and so also do most men. But some men bulk larger as the years recede.

The most striking fact of our time, of a psychological kind, is the growth of Lincoln's fame since the earth closed over his remains. The word Lincolniana has been added to our dictionary. This means that a kind of literature under that name, extensive enough to be separately classified, catalogued, advertised, marketed, and collected into distinct libraries, has grown up. There is a Lincolnian cult among us as well as a Shakespearean cult, and it is gaining votaries from year to year.

### Lincolnian Literature

The first list of Lincoln literature was published by William V. Spencer, in Boston, in 1865. It included 231 titles of books and pamphlets published after Lincoln's death, all of which were in the compiler's possession.

A Lincoln bibliography was compiled by Mr. Daniel Fish of Minneapolis and published in the year 1900. It was revised, enlarged, and republished in 1906, containing 1080 separate titles. It does not include periodical literature, or political writings of the period in which Lincoln lived unless they owe their origin to him as an individual. Judge Fish has in his own collection of Lincolniana 295 bound volumes, 559 pamphlets and 100 portraits.

Mr. Judd Stewart of Plainfield, N. J., has a very notable collection of Lincolniana, embracing 380 bound volumes, about 1200 bound pamphlets, several unpublished letters, between 700 and 800 engravings, lithographs and paintings, and many songs and pieces of sheet music. All of these items have been passed upon by Judge Fish as purely Lincolniana. Mr. Stewart has more than 100 titles which are not included in Fish's bibliography.

A very remarkable collection is that of John E. Burton of Milwaukee, Wis., consisting of 2360 bound volumes and pamphlets, the collection of which, Mr. Burton says, "has been the restful and happy labor of twenty-eight years." Among other things he has the original proclamation of emancipation signed by Lincoln and Seward and attested by John G. Nicolay and John Hay.

Mr. Charles W. McLellan of Champlain, N. Y., has 1921 bound volumes, 1348 pamphlets, eight manuscripts, 138 autographs of Lincoln, 1100 engravings, and 579 songs and miscellaneous pieces, in all more than 5000 items.

Mr. D. H. Newhall of 59 Maiden Lane, New York, has a list of 487 collectors of Lincolniana, for the most part unknown to each other, who are now living; that is, persons who have such collections and who are constantly adding to them. I have corresponded with some of them. . . . Mr. Newhall informs me that he has 2874 titles in his card list of books and pamphlets,—*i. e.*, that he knows of the existence of that number, not counting periodical literature or broadsides. His list is still incomplete, and he believes that it will reach 3000 when finished.

Mr. D. S. Passavant of Zelienople, near Pittsburg, Pa., deals in Lincolniana in foreign languages. Lives of Lincoln have been published in the French, German, Dutch, Swedish, Italian, Russian, Japanese, Spanish, Portuguese, Greek, Welsh and Hawaiian tongues. Mr. Oldroyd's great collection of such relics, now placed in the house where Lincoln died in Washington City, is too well-known to need special description.*

* To Mr. White's list of collectors may be added Mr. Robert Hewitt of Ardsley-on-the-Hudson, whose unrivalled collection of Lincoln medals is described in pages 676–681.—THE EDITORS.

Equally significant is the daily citation of Lincoln's name and authority by public writers and speakers and in conversation between individuals, as an authority in politics and in the conduct of life. Everybody seems to think that a quotation from him is a knock-down argument. His sayings are common property. They are quoted as freely by Democrats as by Republicans. All help themselves from that storehouse, as they make quotations from Shakespeare, or Burns, or Longfellow. He is more quoted to-day than he was in his lifetime, and more than any other American ever was.

## CONCLUSION

So we see that Mr. Lincoln's death did not take place at the culmination of his fame, but that it has been rising and widening ever since and shows no signs of abatement. Of no other American of our times can this be said. Can it be said of any other man of the same period in any part of the world? I cannot find in any country a special department of literature collecting around the name of any statesman of the nineteenth century like that which celebrates the name of our martyr President. This mass of literature is produced and collected and cherished because the hearts of men and women go out to Lincoln. It is not mere admiration for his mental and moral qualities but a silent response to the magnetic influence of his humanity, his unselfish and world-embracing charity. And thus though dead he yet speaketh to men, women and children who never saw him; and so, I think, he will continue to speak to generations yet unborn, world without end, Amen.